

Sunset Avenue Corridor Plan



October 12, 2004

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Executive Summary

The purpose of the Sunset Avenue Corridor Plan is to provide specific information and recommendations for the future development of the 1.2 mile segment of Sunset Avenue between Winstead Avenue and Buck Leonard Boulevard through the year 2020. The policies in this Plan are intended to promote the health, safety, and general welfare of those who travel, live, work, shop, and frequent offices within the study area. It contains information on existing conditions related to zoning and land use, transportation, and community design as well as recommendations for how each of these elements should be addressed. This Plan is a working document to be used by citizens, property owners, planning staff, decision makers, and other interested individuals. The overriding goal of this Plan is to make the environment along Sunset Avenue better for all in the years to come.

The road is a five-lane arterial with a center turn lane for the majority of its length. The study area includes the 77 properties that front Sunset Avenue. Only two parcels remain undeveloped; both of these are on the south side of the corridor. Since little potential for new development along Sunset Avenue exists the future focus will be on redevelopment of existing developed properties.

Four community meetings were held to gather information and ideas from property owners, people who have businesses on Sunset Avenue, people who live along Sunset Avenue and also who live in proximity to the road, as well as anyone interested in this important corridor. The recommendations were generated by input from citizens attending the public meetings, from research conducted by staff, and good planning practice.

Generally, if the recommendations in the 2004 Plan are followed:

- There would be no further commercialization of this segment of Sunset Avenue
- The two major activity/commercial nodes would be contained to stated limits.
- The Office and Institutional zone would continue to be used along the south side to buffer the Englewood community.
- The safety and efficiency of the transportation corridor will be maintained and alternative travel modes will be enhanced.
- The appearance of properties fronting Sunset Avenue would improve over time.

"The plan shall be made with the general purpose of guiding and accomplishing a coordinated, adjusted, and harmonious development of the municipality and its environs which will, in accordance with present and future needs, best promote health, safety, morals, order, convenience, prosperity, and general welfare, as well as efficiency and economy in the process of development. . .

Community Planning: An Introduction to the Comprehensive Plan, p. 43

Zoning and Land Use

The 1973 *Sunset-West Thomas Street Rezoning Plan* has provided guidance for the development of Sunset Avenue between Forest Hill and Winstead Avenues for 31 years.

The 77 parcels in the area were classified as either an “established use” or a “potential site”. Established uses are those that because of their history along the corridor as well as other characteristics, such as newly developed or longstanding, highly utilized, unique services or products, viability, and stability are expected to remain in the future. The 22 potential sites are those properties that for a number of reasons, such as existing uses, location, underutilized land (land value exceeding value of the structure(s), and condition of structure(s) are expected to change in use. These are the sites most likely to redevelop in the next 16 years.

The concept of nodal development is based upon the principle that commercial (shopping) areas are best located at the intersections of major arterials. The concept further includes the use of office areas and multifamily residential as transitional uses between commercial and single-family residential areas.

For the node formed by the intersection of Sunset and Winstead Avenues, it is recommended:

- On the north side, commercial zoning and uses extend eastward to Jones Road.
- On the south side, commercial zoning and uses extend eastward to Tyson Avenue.

For the node formed by the intersection of Sunset Avenue and Buck Leonard Boulevard and Forest Hill Avenue, it is recommended:

- On the north side, commercial zoning and uses extend westward to the Englewood Square Shopping Center.
- On the south side, commercial zoning and uses extend westward to the second parcel. This recommendation would allow for the two parcels west of the intersection of Tyson and Sunset Avenues to be rezoned from O-I to B-2.

The remaining pattern of zoning and land use that exists is reconfirmed in this Plan. This is particularly true for the segment along the south where the O-I zone is recommended to continue to be used along the front properties as a buffer to the Englewood community.

The one exception is the property rezoned B-2 at 3217 Sunset Avenue. This property would be more appropriately zoned O-I to conform to the existing O-I zoning along this segment.

On the north side between Jones Road and the western end of the Englewood Square Shopping Center property, it is recommended that the existing pattern of zoning and land use be confirmed. Retention of the O-I zones here would create a desirable contiguous zoning pattern.

Transportation

No drastic changes in the existing roadway are anticipated, but improvements to promote other travel modes (pedestrian, bicycle and transit) should be pursued. The City and the North Carolina Department of Transportation will evaluate technological advances to improve traffic operations and safety within this corridor.

The transportation recommendations of this Plan are briefly summarized as follows:

- Re-evaluate the appropriateness of the existing speed limit
- Address the median issue in the overlay zone
- Investigate alternatives for the one-way street operation on Patterson Drive
- Determine the appropriate use of right-in/right-out turn out restrictions
- Continue Travel Time Studies on Sunset Avenue
- Evaluate the use of mast arm signal supports
- Evaluate the use of a pedestrian island at signalized intersections
- Install sidewalks on both sides of Sunset Avenue
- Evaluate improvements to enhance safety at the school crosswalk
- Develop a program to install bus stop amenities
- Identify bicycle treatments for Sunset Avenue
- Identify driveways which may be closed
- Establish an Access Management policy which addresses driveway spacing
- Determine if additional Safelight cameras would be beneficial

Community Design

The Plan shows that the study area is significantly established in development pattern. As such, the greater portion of building and site design is not likely to change within the Plan's effective time frame. However, where such opportunity presents, it is the intention of this document to support a quality of development and renovation which enhances the corridor with a proposed zoning overlay district as the guide. The specific elements can be found in Chapter V all based on the following five broad recommendations:

- Provide a unique sense of place within Rocky Mount that is both beautiful and supportive of the appropriate land use adjacent to the corridor.
- Promote the relative prominence of green within the Plan area and reduce the impact of large expansive parking.
- Promote health, safety, and security for the citizens and property in the area.
- Provide adequate services to Sunset Avenue while reducing any negative visual impact of those services.
- Organize and identify development along Sunset Avenue in a way that promotes the community as a whole.

Conclusion

This Plan confirms Sunset Avenue's role as a leading office and commercial corridor, confirms its importance as a gateway into the City, and reinforces its purpose to serve positively the adjacent neighborhood. By implementing the recommendations contained in this Plan, Sunset Avenue will continue to have the competitive edge needed to keep it in its place of prominence – for travel, for retail, for services, and for living.

I. Introduction

Time has not stood still on Sunset Avenue. Long-time residents have seen the sleepy rural road evolve from a two-lane street lined with single-family homes into a hustling corridor of expanded activities. A timeline (I-a) of the significant uses, both current and former, along the arterial is presented at the end of this chapter. As the City's western gateway, Sunset Avenue is a popular facility full of potential to serve the community's ongoing needs. As change is inevitable, this Plan is intended to provide direction on development and redevelopment of properties along Sunset Avenue, so the future of these uses will remain stable and vital.

Purpose of the Plan

As a result of a request to rezone 3400 Sunset Avenue from the Office and Institutional District (O-I) to the B-2 Highway Commercial Business District (B-2) at its October 14, 2003 meeting, the Planning Board directed Planning staff to undertake a land use/transportation study of that portion of Sunset Avenue from Winstead Avenue to some point east. There are several reasons that this directive was given:

- The plan for this segment of Sunset Avenue is 31 years old
- A plan for the western segment of the arterial [*Sunset Avenue (West) Corridor Land Development Plan*] was prepared in 1997, which makes recommendations for the area from Winstead Avenue to Old Carriage Road
- The longstanding unwritten "policy" of the Planning Board to retain the existing Office and Institutional (O-I) zoning and specifically to not rezone properties fronting Sunset Avenue to any commercial (B) zone, particularly along the south side of the road
- The pressure to rezone and redevelop parcels along the eastern segment of the arterial
- The need to provide specific information and recommendations for the future development/redevelopment of the eastern portion of the Sunset Avenue corridor

The purpose of this Plan is to provide specific information and recommendations for the future development of the segment of the Sunset Avenue corridor between Winstead Avenue and Buck Leonard Boule-

vard/Forest Hill Avenue through the year 2020. The policies contained in this Plan are intended to promote the health, safety, and general welfare of those who travel along this roadway and of those who live, work, shop, and frequent offices within the study area. When adopted by the Rocky Mount City Council, this Plan will be an amendment to *Together Tomorrow – Tier 1 Smart Growth Comprehensive Plan for the City of Rocky Mount*, which was adopted by the Council on June 9, 2003.

“The plan shall be made with the general purpose of guiding and accomplishing a coordinated, adjusted, and harmonious development of the municipality and its environs which will, in accordance with present and future needs, best promote health, safety, morals, order, convenience, prosperity, and general welfare, as well as efficiency and economy in the process of development. . .

Community Planning: An Introduction to the Comprehensive Plan, p. 43

This Plan was developed on four overall objectives:

1. To encourage appropriate land development along Sunset Avenue and in a compatible land use pattern
2. To maintain the stability of appropriately located existing land uses
3. To protect and improve the current street system in terms of traffic flow, safety, efficiency, and multi-modal options
4. To recognize the critical importance of this major arterial in the community by encouraging high consistent standards for appearance to improve the quality of life for all citizens

The Study Area

Since the 1997 *Sunset Avenue (West) Corridor Land Development Plan* addressed the segment of Sunset Avenue from Old Carriage Road to Winstead Avenue, it was determined that this Plan would include the 1.2-mile segment from Winstead Avenue east to Buck Leonard Boulevard/Forest Hill Avenue. The road is predominantly a five-lane arterial with a center turn lane for the majority of its length. The study area includes the 77 properties that front Sunset on both the north and south sides (see map I-b and Parcel Inventory in the Appendix). Generally, the area is developed with office and commercial uses with comparatively few single-family and multi-family residences scattered along the corridor. More in-depth discussion of the land uses and other characteristics of Sunset Avenue are included in chapters II, III, and IV.

The Plan-Making Process

The project, which was a joint effort of the Planning and Engineering Departments, began in mid-January 2004. In order to have a better understanding of the various policies and decisions that have shaped Sunset Avenue over the years, staff met with a number of individuals

who have background knowledge and experience relating to this road and its adjacent land uses. It was a very worthwhile exercise as staff gleaned much useful information from the various conversations and also gained clarity on particular policies and the reasoning behind certain decisions that have been made regarding Sunset Avenue over the years. Efforts were also focused on accurately mapping the existing zoning and land uses of the study area. This involved several field trips to verify the land uses, research on the current zoning using the resources available in the Planning Division, and information provided by the attendees at the citizens' meetings.

A series of community meetings was planned to gather information and ideas from property owners, people who live and work on Sunset Avenue, and also those who live in proximity to the road, as well as anyone interested in the future of this important corridor. Public involvement was very important to the plan-making process and provided insights and visions on the future of the corridor. Three community meetings were planned, each with a different focus. A fourth meeting was added when it was realized that additional interaction was needed –

- *Informing* March 25 Englewood United Methodist Church
- *Visioning* April 1 St. Andrews Episcopal Church
- *Visioning* April 20 St. Andrews Episcopal Church
- *Sharing* May 6 Englewood Presbyterian Church

In an attempt to reach as many people as possible, a concerted effort was put into announcing the community meetings in a variety of ways. Notices for each meeting were posted on the City's webpage, flyers were distributed to the churches in the area, signs were posted in strategic locations throughout the study area, and three mailings were sent to 109 owners of the first and second rows of properties along the road. There were also two articles in the *Rocky Mount Telegram* about the study and the community meetings. Attendance at the meetings varied from 35 to 13 people. Many people attended two or more of the meetings, and vocal participation was extensive among the attendees.

At the first meeting, staff administered a *Sunset Avenue Corridor Study Citizen Survey* to begin to understand the concerns and interests of the people who live, work, and shop along the road. The sur-

vey with the results as well as the written comments are included in the Appendix. Staff was able to use these responses along with information that was gathered while doing the initial interviews and to develop the *Guiding Principles for Planning along Sunset Avenue*, which were presented to the citizens at the second community meeting. Staff began brainstorming and visioning with the attendees about the future of Sunset Avenue in an attempt to gain insight on how the corridor may develop or change during the next 16 years. The concept of Established Uses and Potential Sites was discussed, and a map of these sites was prepared (this is discussed more extensively in the Zoning and Land Use chapter). It was realized that an additional meeting was needed to continue gathering ideas. At this third meeting time was also spent on ideas for future transportation-related improvements and on elements of community-design. The final meeting focused on the zoning, land use, transportation, and community design draft recommendations for the study area. This Plan reflects the ideas and visions that were received at these meetings along with good planning principles and policies that have been in place in the City and elsewhere.

At the conclusion of the community meetings, staff prepared the draft language of the Plan to present to the Planning Board at their October 12 meeting. All citizens who participated in the meetings as well as the original list of 109 property owners will be notified that the draft Plan is available for their review. There will also be a notice placed on the City webpage about the availability of the Plan, and a copy will be placed in the Reference section of Braswell Library as well as the Planning Library. It is anticipated that there will be work-sessions on the document with possible updates prior to the Planning Board recommending adoption. It is anticipated that the Plan will be forwarded to the City Council for their review, a public hearing, and eventual approval.

Guiding Principles

As mentioned above, the 10 *Guiding Principles for Planning along Sunset Avenue* were developed from a number of sources. These key principles form the foundation from which the recommendations were developed. The general concepts were discussed with the citizen participants to make certain that there were common overall goals for the future of the area. The principles are:

- To encourage appropriate land development along major arterials and to promote compatible land use patterns
- To preserve our residential neighborhoods
- To use the Office and Institutional (O-I) zone as a transitional zone between single-family residential areas and commercial activity – used as a “buffer zone”
- To cluster commercial (shopping) areas at the intersections of major arterials – nodal development concept
- To maintain the stability of appropriately located existing land uses
- To provide a safe transportation corridor
- To protect the traffic carrying capacity and efficiency of arterials
- To consolidate driveways where possible and to create adequate spacing between driveways
- To promote a multi-modal transportation network by facilitating the needs of transit patrons, bicyclists, and pedestrians
- To encourage context-sensitive design along the corridor as recommended in *Together Tomorrow – Tier 1 Smart Growth Comprehensive Plan for the City of Rocky Mount* adopted by the City Council June 9, 2003



The guiding principles that relate to each of the major elements of this Plan – zoning and land use, transportation, and community design – will be highlighted in the applicable chapters.

Organization of the Plan

As seen in the Table of Contents, the Plan has been organized into six chapters. The Executive Summary provides a concise overview of the contents of the Plan. In addition to this Introduction, the next

three chapters contain elements traditionally included in a plan document – zoning and land use, transportation, and community design. Background information and a description of the existing characteristics of each element are presented first, followed by recommendations for each element. These recommendations are intended to provide guidance on future change and development of Sunset Avenue within the study area. Maps relating to the material contained in each chapter have been included at the end of each appropriate chapter in the order in which they are mentioned in the text.

